



County Executive Scott Walker
2007 Budget Address
September 28, 2006

Chairman Holloway, members of the County Board, Sheriff Clarke, Clerk Ryan, fellow citizens of Milwaukee County: thank you for the opportunity to address you here today.

Later this morning, a valued member of our cabinet – John Hayes – will be going in for surgery. I ask that we take a moment to think of him and pray for a safe recovery.

During the year since my last budget address, our County Veterans Service Officer Domingo Leguizamon was deployed overseas as part of Iraqi Freedom. I ask that we remember him and the many others from Milwaukee County who are serving in our Armed Forces today. In their honor, we fly a Blue Star flag - much like this - in front of our courthouse.

Here in my hand is a piece of the old annex parking structure. After 36 years, that failing cement slab over the freeway is finally down. Amazing to many, there is a new view of the courthouse – a new vision, if you will – and people like it.

In a way, our budget also calls for us to tear down the broken pieces from the past and replace them with a new vision of hope for Milwaukee County.

For too many years, we've seen our seniors forced to move out of their homes because of rapidly rising property taxes. Now, we fear a similar trend with young families.

Taking on our fiscal challenges is no easy task, but adding to our tax burden is not the answer. Asking for more from our taxpayers would be like Ford or GM raising the price of their cars to pay for their legacy costs. A decision like that would only help the other automakers and would be a sign of a failed enterprise.

We need to tackle the high costs of running the government before we start asking for more revenue from the taxpayers. That is why I am pleased to present my fifth straight budget that does not raise the property tax levy from the previous year.

Holding the line on taxes will help control the cost-of-living in our county. In turn, I hope to keep more people in their homes and more jobs in our area. This is key to my vision of hope for Milwaukee County.

And it doesn't stop with taxes. Crime in our community is too high. We must tear down the barriers to cleaning up our neighborhoods.

Safe communities where neighbors work with local law enforcement are a part of my vision of hope. And the county should be a supplement to, not a substitute for, local police departments.

Where we do play a direct role in addressing public safety is through our programs with young people caught up in the juvenile justice system. We continue to build up our programs to divert these young people away from a life of crime. Our budget provides more services to help these kids reconnect with their families, their churches and their communities.

And public safety also means responding to medical emergencies. Despite our fiscal challenges, my budget includes full funding for the EMS system in our county. Insuring that everyone in the county has access to one of the best paramedic systems in the nation is part of my vision of hope.

Another priority in our community is a strong parks system. But support for the parks started to decline more than two decades ago. In 1980, 45% of the county tax levy went to the parks system. By 2000, that had dropped to under 10%.

Parts of the system are still stuck in the 1950s and 60s. It is time to move into the 21st century. Our budget includes major changes to the parks that build a system for the future, not one anchored to the past.

The ultimate vision of hope for the parks is the creation of a new Park District. Nearly all of the award winning parks systems from across the country come from park districts and it is time to build one here in Milwaukee County.

We once had the best park system in the world. The basic foundation is still there, but we need to move to a governing structure that rebuilds our parks once again into the best of the best.

While parks have an impact on nearly everyone, protecting those in need impacts a smaller group - yet it too is a core mission for county government. For years, people with mental illness have faced incredible obstacles to living in the

community. One of the biggest challenges is access to quality housing. Earlier this year, we saw a lot of finger pointing between the city, the state, the county and groups within the community.

It's time to tear down the barriers to assisting those who need our help the most. I'm proud to include a major initiative in this budget to fundamentally change the way we seek to help people with mental illness and the family and friends who support them.

My vision of hope also includes ways to build up our support for people with disabilities, support for our older adults, support for our veterans and support for the poor in our community.

Preserving our quality of life is also a priority. In the future, we want to tear down the hurdles to growth and – instead – build up our relationships with those who support places like the zoo and other cultural attractions. A strong and vibrant quality of life is part of my vision of hope for the future.

Being able to enjoy these quality attractions means being able to afford to live in our region, but not everyone can today. We need to acknowledge that there are pockets of poverty in our county that have grown too large and too severe. We must tear down the walls blocking many of our citizens from economic prosperity.

Helping the region grow our economy is part of my vision of hope for Milwaukee County. Jobs and opportunity must increase and the county can play a significant role by using our assets. We must counter the idea that the government must somehow hoard these assets, and instead, unleash them to spur economic development.

Finally, we must tear down the things that keep this government from running well. My vision includes ways to increase efficiencies and effectiveness – and an ability to restore fiscal responsibility by controlling our benefit and state mandate costs.

Most importantly, we must find a way to tear down our political and personal differences and move forward on building a shared vision of hope for this great county. And that has already begun as members of the board leadership and I started meeting to discuss the budget process, but there is more work to be done.

At times, this may seem difficult but we need only remember what a challenge it was to take down the annex. Yet today, we now have a new view of our beautiful courthouse.

With your help – I believe that together we can build a new vision of hope and make our county great once again.